



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

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## **THESIS**

**STRATEGIC CHOICE: UNITED STATES SPECIAL  
FORCES' COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE IN  
IRREGULAR WARFARE**

by

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March 2017

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**STRATEGIC CHOICE: UNITED STATES SPECIAL FORCES' COMPARATIVE  
ADVANTAGE IN IRREGULAR WARFARE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Over the last 100 years, strong state actors have struggled to achieve policy goals when involved in conflicts with weaker actors. Irregular Warfare has become the tool of choice for weak opponents to wage war against strong actors such as the United States. Weak actors are achieving more frequent success against powerful opponents by using indirect strategies. This thesis examines the conflict interaction between weak and strong actors. For the strong actor, this thesis identifies that when there is limited political maneuver space, limited resources, and the importance of the objective is less than vital to national security interests, an indirect strategy becomes the most practical approach to combat a weaker opponent using an indirect approach. Using the aforementioned methodology, this thesis concludes that U.S. Army Special Forces have a comparative advantage over conventional forces to provide the National Command Authorities with a means to address indirect threats from weaker actors.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

COIN	Counter Insurgency
FID	Foreign Internal Defense
GWOT	Global War on Terrorism
NCA	National Command Authority
NSC	National Security Council
USSF	United States Special Forces
UW	Unconventional Warfare
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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## I. BACKGROUND

Choosing a strategy with the appropriate means to effectively implement that strategy to achieve policy goals is of great importance to any organization. However, the ability to develop a sound strategy and choose the correct tools to implement that strategy has posed a problem to organizations, of all types, for many years. Governments, in particular, have struggled with this issue. Governments preparing for war develop strategies and use their military forces to execute said strategies to achieve policy goals. Prior to the start of the nuclear era, this was a relatively simple concept. Large-scale armies and navies would fight to determine the victor in a direct conflict interaction. The stronger actor would normally dominate these interactions and could often impose its will over the weaker actor. However, within the last 100 years this dynamic has changed.

An interesting paradigm shift has occurred within the international arena where, more than ever before, powerful actors can no longer count on absolute power to dominate military interaction with weaker actors. The French strategist, Andre Beaufre, said, “Because of the existence of the nuclear weapon and the agitation for decolonization, there is a wide field open to this (indirect) strategy and, as we shall see, it has become extremely complex and frighteningly effective.”<sup>1</sup> No longer can any actor be certain of defeating another actor on the battlefield of the enemy’s choosing based on strength alone.<sup>2</sup> Beaufre tells us that the nature of interaction between states has changed. Power alone is insufficient in the realm of international relations as the weak now have a method, the indirect strategy, to undermine the traditional advantages of the strong. The direct strategy, or a strategy that depends on superior resources and power, does not necessarily coerce an enemy any longer.<sup>3</sup> As a result, a different approach may be required to achieve policy goals in an indirect conflict model.

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<sup>1</sup> André Beaufre, *An Introduction to Strategy: With Particular Reference to Problems of Defense, Politics, Economics, and Diplomacy in the Nuclear Age* (New York: Praeger, 1965), 108.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>3</sup> Hy S. Rothstein, “Strategy and Psychological Operations,” in *Information Strategy and Warfare: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, ed. John Arquilla and Douglas A. Borer (New York: Routledge, 2007), 170.

Beaufre's concept assists in selecting the appropriate strategy. Beaufre indicates that the indirect approach must be considered in any contest no matter the absolute power of the actors involved.<sup>4</sup> According to Beaufre, a reason to select an indirect approach is related to an actor's "freedom of action or freedom of maneuver."<sup>5</sup> Freedom of action refers to the physical, political, and economic maneuver space available to the actors involved in a conflict. If an actor finds itself at the precipice of conflict, and it is at a disadvantage in that its freedom to utilize all of its instruments of national power is restricted; then the actors involved find themselves in a situation that may require an indirect approach.<sup>6</sup>

This concept is especially true for the United States. The current state of economic and political affairs within the United States has implications for the future use of the military. Today, with over 15 years of conflict, across-the-board defense cuts, force reductions, and war weariness have taken their toll and placed the United States in a position of reduced freedom of maneuver. One could assume that the U.S. National Command Authorities (NCA) will need a cost-effective means to achieve policy objectives that are both fiscally cost effective, politically acceptable, and of reduced risk to the nation. Additionally, with the increase of irregular warfare in the post-World War II world, there is a need for military units that can provide effective solutions that conventional military units cannot provide effectively and efficiently.

With the exception of World War I and World War II, most of the conflicts in which the United States has been involved over the last century have required indirect strategies.<sup>7</sup> In this thesis, indirect conflict refers to conflict interactions of an asymmetric

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<sup>4</sup> Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*. (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1967), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Beaufre, *Introduction to Strategy*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart may have been one of the first strategist to consider the indirect approach as an effective strategy choice. Hart indicates that most actors will manifest strength and power outwardly, but will rely on stability, morale, and supply to project their strength. Hart also indicates that attacking an adversary's political and psychological will is vital to their defeat. These concepts will be key to this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*. Vol. 99 (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

nature whereby the actors rely on insurgency or guerrilla warfare methods to overcome the strength and power of a stronger actor. In most of these conflicts, the United States has typically responded using conventional military forces executing direct strategies or what is referred to in a recently released RAND study as an “iron fist approach.”<sup>8</sup> Quite often, the response has ended with less-than-optimal outcomes for the United States.<sup>9</sup> In cases of this nature, the conflict has ended with the more powerful actor withdrawing before achieving its policy goals. The issue then becomes, what tools are available to policy makers to prevent defeat in these types of strategic interactions?<sup>10</sup>

## **A. RESEARCH QUESTION**

Do United States Special Forces (USSF) offer U.S. policy makers an effective and efficient alternative, to conventional military forces in achieving policy goals? If so, under what conditions do USSF offer strategic alternatives for achieving policy goals? This thesis will attempt to answer these questions. While much has been written on the tactical and operational impacts and the advantages of USSF, there is still relatively little written on the use of USSF to achieve national-level policy goals. This thesis seeks to address the strategic utility of USSF.

By understanding when USSF can best be used as an instrument of national power, policy makers and military leaders alike have the ability to select the optimum tool to achieve U.S. policy goals and avoid committing large scale, expensive

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan, *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013), xxix.

<sup>9</sup> Paths to Victory is a recently released Rand Corporation study that analyzes counter insurgency efforts of 71 cases of counter insurgency since the end of World War II. The iron fist approach as used in the body of this thesis is taken from the Rand study and is used here to indicate the use of a more direct approach. In Paths to Victory the iron fist approach is defined as an enemy centric COIN strategy that sees insurgency as much more akin to conventional warfare. Defeat of the enemy is the primary goal of the counter insurgent in this method.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that this thesis assumes that the wrong forces along with inappropriate strategies have been and are being used to attain policy goals within the irregular conflict environment Both conventional military units and Special Forces can conduct indirect operations. However, this thesis assumes that Special Forces can do it more effectively and efficiently under certain circumstances. Furthermore, this thesis assumes that the most common reaction by the United States to an emerging indirect threat is to apply a conventional direct response (inappropriate strategy) sometimes using Special Forces to execute that direct response without achieving policy goals. This phenomenon has been visible over the last 15 years in Afghanistan.

conventional U.S. forces to conflicts where their very presence may undermine policy goals. If Special Forces do, in fact, possess a significant comparative advantage, under specific circumstances, and can provide strategic capabilities to U.S. policy makers with less political and economic risk than conventional forces, then USSF would provide the United States with significant effective and efficient alternatives. Therefore, USSF could provide an optimal solution to successfully counter future threats that necessitate indirect strategies.

## **B. HYPOTHESIS**

Special Forces offer U.S. policy makers greater strategic utility and comparative advantage against indirect threats compared to conventional forces under specific conditions. Special Forces' comparative advantage lies in their ability to achieve policy goals under the following conditions:

1. Freedom of maneuver is restricted
2. Resources available are constrained due to physical, fiscal, and or political limitations.
3. Importance of the objective may be less than vital to the national interest or national survival.

It is important to note that these conditions are not all-encompassing and there are other factors that affect conflict outcome, but the aforementioned factors hold significant importance. The key to this hypothesis is based primarily on the criteria of restricted freedom of maneuver, which will be discussed in Chapter II. While the importance of the objective and the available resources are important, Special Forces may offer the greatest strategic advantage when freedom of maneuver is restricted for the United States. It is also important to note that this thesis will focus on U.S. involvement in conflicts from 2001–2013 and will not account for changes in U.S. policy or strategy after that time frame.

This hypothesis is heavily based on Andre Beaufre's *An Introduction to Strategy*. Beaufre suggests that indirect strategies are optimized under very specific criteria. Beaufre's conditions result in the requirement to develop an indirect strategy to succeed.

Additionally, Ivan Arreguín-Toft's findings in *How the Weak Win Wars* will be used to support the notion that the U.S. must be able to increasingly apply indirect strategies against future indirect threats. The primary assumption of Arreguín-Toft's thesis is that in conflict, the type of approach each actor applies matters to its outcome. If both actors apply the same type of approach (direct vs. direct or indirect vs. indirect), Arreguín-Toft's analysis says that the stronger actor will likely win. However, if the stronger actor applies a direct approach and the weaker actor applies an indirect approach, the weaker actor becomes much more likely to win.<sup>11</sup> Following this logic, Arreguín-Toft suggests that the United States should build two separate militaries, one for conventional direct approaches and one for unconventional indirect approaches.<sup>12</sup> This thesis explores the notion that Special Forces have a comparative advantage compared to conventional military forces for executing indirect strategies and provides the second military force to which Arreguín-Toft refers. In other words, USSF has greater strategic utility under the proper circumstances and offer the National Command Authorities (NCA) the optimum force for an indirect strategy.

### **C. METHODOLOGY**

To better understand and examine the hypothesis, this thesis is organized into five chapters, each dealing with critical elements aimed at answering the research question. Chapter II of this thesis focuses on providing a better understanding of indirect warfare and outlines the importance of possessing an appropriate strategic approach to an indirect conflict. Ivan Arreguín-Toft's findings are used to provide the background for this chapter. Arreguín-Toft's central thesis is, "when actors employ opposite strategic approaches (direct-indirect or indirect-direct), weak actors are much more likely to win, even when everything we think we know about power says they shouldn't."<sup>13</sup> Arreguín-Toft's statistical data concerning conflict between different types of actors and strategies employed will be the primary tools used to outline the importance of choosing an

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<sup>11</sup> Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 18.

appropriate strategy in a conflict. This thesis will then use Andre Beaufre's, *Introduction to Strategy*, to aid in investigating the hypothesis of this thesis. Beaufre's logic for selecting an indirect strategy will be used to answer the research question of this thesis. Relying heavily on Arreguín-Toft and Beaufre, this thesis will show why it is important to execute the appropriate strategy. Ultimately, this chapter will give the reader a better understanding of the terms, indirect conflict, indirect strategy, and freedom of maneuver. Additionally, this chapter highlights not only the importance of developing an indirect strategy, but also the importance of possessing the proper tools to execute such a strategy and using those tools appropriately.

Chapter III shifts focus from the strategy to the tools used to implement the strategy. USSF are examined as an organization to give the reader some understanding as to how Special Forces are trained, equipped, and organized. This chapter looks at current doctrine to determine the potential strategic utility Special Forces offer U.S. policy makers under the appropriate conditions.

Chapter IV discusses several cases of conflict involving the United States. The first two cases look at conflicts in which both conventional forces and Special Forces were used to achieve the desired end state. The third case focuses on a smaller, irregular conflict in which Special Forces were primarily used to achieve U.S. Policy goals. Together, these case studies will help to determine whether USSF have a comparative advantage over conventional forces under the conditions previously identified.

The first two cases to be analyzed are Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, the U.S. action in Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks in September of 2001 and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, the U.S. action in Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein and search for weapons of mass destruction. Both of these cases are conflicts in which Special Forces were used in conjunction with conventional military forces to achieve strategic objectives. Both cases also involve the U.S. attacking its enemy with varying approaches (direct-direct, direct-indirect, and indirect-indirect) against an enemy that also varied its conflict approach. Next, this chapter will analyze U.S. actions in the Philippines where U.S. Special Forces were used to meet strategic objectives. These case studies will serve as the basis for testing the hypothesis because of their more recent relevance to U.S.

strategic choice. Likewise, these cases illustrate scenarios where USSF were used to achieve significant policy goals in complex and dynamic environments.

Chapter V summarizes the findings of this thesis by tying together the concepts of strategic utility, indirect strategies, and how Special Forces may offer the U.S. government greater comparative advantage over conventional forces.

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## **II. INDIRECT APPROACHES: AN ADVANTAGE DEFINED**

To better understand how United States Army Special Forces (USSF) can provide significant strategic advantage for U.S. decision makers, the appropriate operational context in which USSF offer a comparative advantage must first be understood. To understand this context there are terms that must first be defined. This chapter will define those terms and provide an analysis of why strong actors have been losing to weaker actors increasingly over the past 100 years. Additionally, this chapter will outline a strategy that has the potential to prevent this outcome and describe the conditions in which the strong can increase their probability of success in irregular warfare. The analysis will seek to determine if a small specialized force, specifically formed and trained to conduct irregular warfare, has a higher probability of success than larger, conventional formations against the same threat. In addition, this chapter will define indirect conflict. Finally, this section will highlight the frequency of indirect conflict since World War II and examine the implications of indirect warfare on strong actors.

### **A. IRREGULAR WARFARE**

Irregular warfare is a concept as old as war itself as strong actors have attempted to force the weak to submit to their will. Ivan Arreguín-Toft defines this form of warfare as “those [conflicts] in which one side is possessed of overwhelming power with respect to its adversary.”<sup>14</sup>

From biblical stories of David attempting to kill the giant, Goliath, to modern non-state actors such as Al Qaeda attempting to undermine the United States, the weak have struggled against the strong and will likely continue that struggle into the foreseeable future. Fundamentally, the weak should not defeat the strong. A strong actor’s ability to outmatch the weak economically, militarily, and diplomatically should guarantee the stronger actor’s victory in any contest. However, according to the evidence presented in this section, this paradigm is beginning to shift. Since the weak cannot

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<sup>14</sup> Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, xi.

overcome their absolute power deficit with a direct confrontation, the weak are forced to turn to indirect strategies to subvert the power of the strong. Weak actors use insurgency, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, subversion, sabotage, and various other necessary tactics to strike at the strong actor's power base so that the weak can increase their freedom of maneuver, their will to fight, and ultimately increase their probability of success against a much stronger actor. This technique, the weak fighting the strong with an indirect approach to avoid the powerful actor's strength, has become more common since the end of World War II. What is troubling, especially for powerful actors, is that the weak are beginning to win these interactions at an increased rate.

The term indirect conflict, as used in this thesis, conforms with Ivan Arreguín-Toft's definition of the term in his book *How the Weak Win Wars*. Arreguín-Toft defines indirect conflict as conflict that seeks to undermine and destroy an adversary's will to resist.<sup>15</sup> By destroying an actor's will to fight or resist, that actor's physical power is negated. Thus, indirect conflict seeks to attack the enemy's will to carry on the war. Most often, this is conducted through terrorism, insurgency, guerrilla warfare, and those tactics that seek to undermine the public and political support of a conflict and ultimately the will of the actor to fight.<sup>16</sup>

The very nature of the indirect conflict is challenging for the weaker actor as the indirect approach attempts to bypass the stronger actor's material or force advantage and focus on affecting their support base. Paraphrasing Arreguín-Toft, incremental losses caused by the indirect approach targets the political forces in the stronger actor's homeland.<sup>17</sup> This statement is referring to the fact that the indirect conflict, from the standpoint of the weak, seeks to capitalize on making the conflict unpalatable at home, thereby forcing the strong actor to withdraw from the conflict and ultimately lose or accept a draw with the adversary. This discussion provides a limited understanding of

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<sup>15</sup> Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> It is important to note here that these tactics depend on a nation's status as a weak actor or as a strong actor. In the case of the weaker actor, indirect conflict consists of the terms mentioned above. In the case of the strong actor, indirect conflict consists of the counters to the tactics mentioned above.

<sup>17</sup> Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 34.

indirect conflict. However, within this narrow view lies the true nature of this type of conflict; protracted, unpalatable, insidious, and irregular means designed to undermine the enemy's will to carry on the war and therefore negate the absolute power advantage that the strong actor possess.

In any struggle, there is an expectation that persistence and power will ensure victory. This assumption is true whether one is referring to a boxing match or a battle between two armies. Absolute power should prevail in a contest between actors; prior to World War II this paradigm was usually the case although not without exceptions. Weaker actors who challenge stronger actors with direct approaches and attempt to match the stronger actor's power, persistence, and resources during a conflict, lose. Estimates in Ivan Arreguín-Toft's, *How the Weak Win Wars*, indicate that from 1800–2003, stronger actors succeeded in defeating weaker actors over 70 percent of the time when the same conflict approach was used by both actors.<sup>18</sup> This supports the logic that an actor with greater resources, greater technology, and greater fighting strength will typically win when fighting against a weaker opponent. However, this dynamic has changed and the stronger actor, relying on absolute power alone, is now less likely to win.

Since World War II, there has been a significant increase in irregular conflict around the world. Figures show a significant change in the results of these interactions. As puzzling as it may be, weaker actors win in wars more often against strong actors. Strong actors have struggled to develop strategies to cope with weaker adversaries that use indirect approaches. Also since World War II, the likelihood the stronger actor would achieve success against a weaker actor has dropped dramatically.<sup>19</sup> This development is shown in Figure 1.

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<sup>18</sup> Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 3.

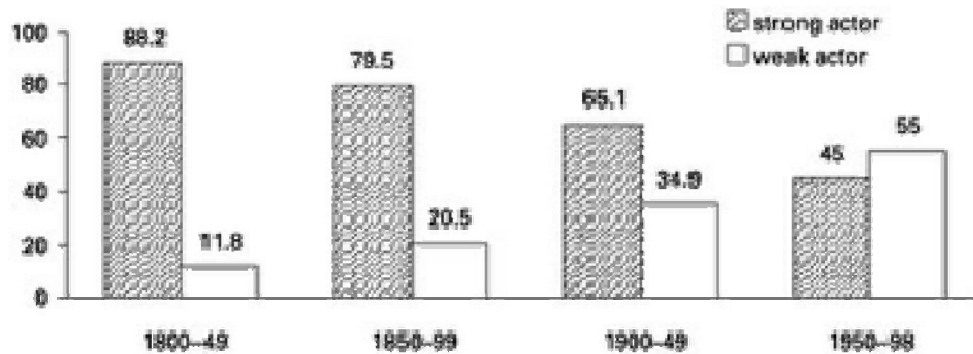


Figure 1. Percentage of Conflict Victories by Type of Actor over Time.<sup>20</sup>

As shown in Figure 1, since 1800 strong actors had been able to routinely beat weak actors. However, beginning in 1900, there was a significant shift and weaker actors began to win more often. Surprisingly, weak actors won a majority of the conflict interactions from 1950 to 2003.<sup>21</sup> This data should be troubling for strong actors. Intuitively, the more powerful actor should not only win, but should win quickly and decisively. However, strong actors have vulnerabilities with regard to public and political support.<sup>22</sup> Since the strong are expected to achieve a quick victory, every day that passes without demonstrated success represents a wane in the political will of the strong to fight. Once the will of the people degrades to the point of non-support, the strong abandon the conflict. In this way, the weak have successfully undermined the strong actor's will to fight, and increased their own chances for victory. These figures now prompt the question: Why are weaker actors increasingly winning against stronger opponents?

There are myriad explanations as to why strong actors are struggling to defeat weaker actors. One explanation given by Ivan Arreguín-Toft indicates that the strategic interaction between contestants has the most important impact on the results of the conflict.<sup>23</sup> In other words, Arreguín-Toft says that the outcome of the conflict depends on

<sup>20</sup> Adapted from Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*. (Vol. 99 (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005), figure used in online version of written work, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/international\\_security/v026/26.1toft\\_fig04.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/international_security/v026/26.1toft_fig04.html).

<sup>21</sup> Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>23</sup> Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 18.

the individual strategies employed by each actor and how those strategies relate to one another.<sup>24</sup> Arreguín-Toft organizes conflict interactions into two types, direct and indirect. The outcome of the conflict will depend greatly on how the weak and strong actors apply these strategies against each other. Arreguín-Toft elaborates on this theory by explaining:

when actors employ similar strategic approaches (direct-direct or indirect-indirect) relative power explains the outcome: strong actors will win quickly and decisively. When actors employ opposite strategic approaches (direct-indirect or indirect-direct), weak actors are much more likely to win, even when everything we think we know about power says they shouldn't.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, if a strong actor is involved in a contest with a weak actor and the weak actor is using an indirect approach against a stronger actor that is using direct approach, statistically, the stronger actor is more likely to lose. This assessment should be troubling for the United States because the U.S. has experienced this phenomenon first hand in Vietnam and operations IRAQI FREEDOM and ENDURING FREEDOM. The aforementioned trend is represented in Figure 2.

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<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that strategic interactions are the only factors that determine a victor, but there is strong evidence in *How the Weak Win Wars* that demonstrates that the strategic interaction theory strongly lends itself to determining the victor of the conflict.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 18.

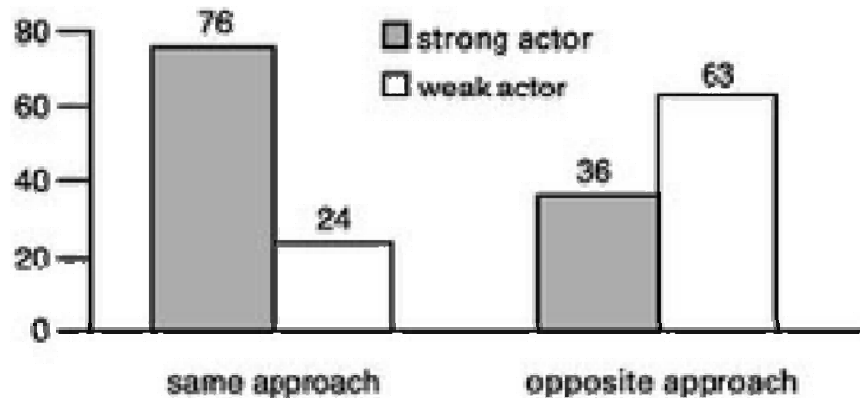


Figure 2. Strategic Interaction and Asymmetric Conflict Outcomes, 1800–2001<sup>26</sup>

As shown in Figure 2, the trend of strong actors losing to the weak is quite dramatic when observed through the strategic interaction lens. In interactions where the strong and weak actors employed the same strategy (direct-direct, indirect-indirect) the strong actor was able to defeat the weak actor 76 percent of the time. However, if the strong actor employed a different approach from the weak (direct-indirect) then the results reverse and we find that the weak actor wins 63 percent of the time.<sup>27</sup> Concerning conflict with the United States, both strong and weak adversaries will increasingly remain reluctant to engage the United States with a direct approach due to resource and power overmatch, thus forcing the weaker adversary to employ an indirect approach. If the U.S. or stronger actor does not strategically engage with a similar approach, it is preparing for a potential defeat.

The information presented in Figure 2 is an indication that weaker actors are beginning to realize they can create an advantage over strong actors and are successfully capitalizing on that advantage. No longer is military victory assured based on the absolute

<sup>26</sup> Adapted from Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*. (Vol. 99 (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005), figure used in online version of written work, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/international\\_security/v026/26.1toft\\_fig04.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/international_security/v026/26.1toft_fig04.html) .

<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that Arreguín-Toft uses a power factor ratio of 10 when calculating the relative power factor between combatants. For his cases, only those interactions whereby the strong overpowered the weak by a factor of 10:1 were considered. Therefore, the strong actors in his research are considerably stronger than the weak actors.

power of an actor. Today, there is a requirement to economically, politically, and psychologically affect the ability of an actor to wage war.<sup>28</sup> Now that the weak are adopting strategies to defeat stronger actors, the strong must adapt their strategies accordingly. As the data indicates, if the strong wish to increase their odds of winning an indirect conflict against a weak actor, the strong must adopt a strategic approach similar to that of the weak. This approach is the indirect strategy.

## **1. Indirect Strategy**

The previous section shows that powerful actors are increasingly losing to weaker actors based mostly on faulty strategic choices. While the indirect strategy appears to be the best solution to counter weaker actors that use indirect approaches, strong actors seem to prefer direct strategies. According to the data, there is a real threat to strong actors and an increasing need for strong actors to employ indirect strategies.

Indirect strategy is a broad term that is vague and difficult to apply without having the proper context. This section will define indirect strategy as it applies to strategic interactions between strong and the weak actors. The definition will be organized into three parts that will aid in explaining the meaning of the term as it relates to the hypothesis of this thesis; Special Forces offer U.S. policy makers greater strategic utility and comparative advantage against indirect threats compared to conventional forces under specific conditions. Finally, this section will focus on the types of units that can most effectively and efficiently execute an indirect strategy.

The indirect strategy is focused on affecting an adversary by avoiding a head-to-head confrontation. Andre Beaufre further defines the indirect strategy by paraphrasing Liddell Hart's definition and explaining that the indirect strategy seeks to avoid the trial by strength and attack him only after the adversary is distracted by some unexpected effect.<sup>29</sup> Beaufre continues to elaborate on the concept by indicating that the indirect strategy is a must for an actor that cannot be sure one's own strength can overcome an

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<sup>28</sup> Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (January 1975): 195. doi:10.2307/2009880.

<sup>29</sup> Beaufre, *Introduction to Strategy*, 107.

adversary.<sup>30</sup> Both Beaufre and Liddell Hart offer a prelude to Arreguín-Toft's findings. The indirect strategy is a necessary means to defeat an adversary when absolute power alone is not sufficient. In the context of Beaufre and Liddell Hart, the indirect strategy generally is referenced only when speaking about actors that are weak. However, when confronted with a weak adversary using an indirect approach, strong actors lose the ability to rely on absolute strength alone and therefore in terms of relative power are no stronger than their weaker opponent and, in fact, may be weaker from a political and public will perspective.

For a strong actor, such as the United States, there are three main factors involved when choosing to implement an indirect strategy to win a conflict. Obviously, there are many other considerations involved in national security policy decisions, but these three factors have the greatest potential to impact the outcome of the conflict. These factors place limitations on strong actors that have a direct correlation with the strong actor's ability to influence through absolute power. The factors include freedom of maneuver, resource limitations, and the importance of the objective. It is important to note that these factors should be measured in relation to the adversary. For example, freedom of maneuver of the United States relative to the Vietnamese must be considered when conducting an analysis of the Vietnam conflict. Each of these factors has a level of influence on the need of the strong actor to employ an indirect strategy. However, freedom of maneuver is by far the most influential of the factors for the stronger actor. The next section will outline each concept and explain how it affects the need for an indirect strategy.

## **2. Freedom of Maneuver**

As Liddell Hart indicates, strategy forms the method of conflict execution and determines how the actor will conduct itself in the conflict.<sup>31</sup> An indirect strategy serves as the plan for how an actor can approach an indirect threat without succumbing to the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>31</sup> Liddell Hart, *Strategy* 2d rev ed., 319.



phenomenon mentioned by Arreguín-Toft's data in the previous section. The indirect strategy focuses on methods aimed at destroying an adversary's will to resist and continue to fight.

"Will to resist" is an ambiguous concept. Drawing from Andre Beaufre's findings, the will to resist can be thought of in terms of freedom of maneuver. For Beaufre, freedom of maneuver refers to the physical boundaries that confine the conflict to include the repercussions that the conflict may have on the international community.<sup>32</sup> This thesis expands on that idea.

Freedom of maneuver then becomes the physical and political space an actor occupies that must be considered to wage war. Political freedom of maneuver will often define this space and can be a severely limiting factor that affects the strategy decision of an actor. Political will refers to the psychological ability of the actor to continue the conflict. Political will is affected not only by external influences of the international community, but also by domestic internal politics. This is especially true in democratic nations such as the United States.<sup>33</sup> Some sort of coalition or the consent of an international organization is usually necessary to wage war. Without such consent, freedom of maneuver is reduced significantly. Internally, war weariness and disapproval of long and costly conflicts have a direct negative impact on the freedom of maneuver granted to a nation waging war. In other words, for a democratic nation, in the absence of clear success, the will to carry on the conflict diminishes over time.

By utilizing an indirect strategy, an actor can mitigate some of these limiting factors. In the post-World War II era, freedom of maneuver still fits its classical definition, but increasingly the dynamic influences of the information age on domestic and international audiences, which ultimately affect political will, must be taken into account. Freedom of maneuver applies to all actors directly involved and on the periphery and can have severe implications on the conduct of a conflict. Whenever an actor's

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<sup>32</sup> Beaufre, *Introduction to Strategy*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> Will to carry on the conflict applies less to actors that have authoritarian regimes. The authoritarian government is not bound by its people, in most cases, and can execute a conflict with any strategy it deems appropriate. The United States does not fit into this category.

freedom of maneuver is reduced, be it from economic issues at home, political complexities abroad, or from the war weariness of its own people, a country may find itself in a situation where it cannot bring the full power of its military to bear to pursue its policy objectives. Therefore, freedom of maneuver becomes the most important element of an indirect approach due to the effect an actor's freedom of maneuver will have on its ability to expend resources and how the importance of the objective will be viewed from a political and public perspective. As this freedom of maneuver decreases, an actor increasingly must seek the best possible way to maximize the use of his decreased maneuver space and resource limitations to achieve his policy goals.<sup>34</sup> Otherwise, the actor risks limiting his options to the point where he can no longer sustain a conflict and thus will be forced to accept a less-than-optimal outcome.

When a strong actor, such as the United States, has diminished freedom of maneuver, an indirect strategy becomes a plausible option to mitigate the strong actor's loss of maneuver space. As previously stated, the indirect strategy seeks to attack the adversary's will to fight and as a result decreases the actor's ability to wage war. Therefore, with decreased freedom of maneuver it may be prudent for the actor to choose an indirect strategy to succeed.<sup>35</sup>

### **3. Resources**

Another factor that can affect the decision of a strong actor to choose a strategy is the availability of resources relative to one's opponent. The main resources that influence the need for an indirect strategy include, but are not limited to, economic resources and military power. While this category is not as important as the freedom of maneuver, it still has significant bearing on the strategy an actor will employ in a conflict.

It is obvious that limited economic resources may force decision makers to choose a particular type of strategy for a conflict. In acknowledging this assumption, this thesis assumes indirect approaches require more time to succeed. A recent Rand study indicates

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<sup>34</sup> Beaufre, *Introduction to Strategy*, 109.

<sup>35</sup> Liddell Hart, *Strategy* 2d rev ed., 320.

that the mean duration of an insurgency is 128 months.<sup>36</sup> The report also shows that the mean duration for winning an insurgency is 152.2 months and the mean duration for losing is 112 months.<sup>37</sup> The assumption is that most indirect conflicts will be protracted. A strong actor who must counter the indirect strategy of a weaker actor will thus face the proposition of planning for a long-duration conflict and mitigating its political effects. Even if the actor begins a conflict on economically sound ground, there is no guarantee that this condition will persist for the duration of the conflict. Large, powerful militaries are expensive to maintain and extremely expensive to employ, especially in long conflicts. To add to that expense, an actor's military power cannot affect an adversary unless the military can effectively target the enemy either kinetically or non-kinetically. In other words, the strongest military in the world, using all of its technology and advanced weaponry, cannot kill an enemy unless the enemy can be seen. If a small agile adversary can effectively hide from targeting efforts, then the strong actor's operating costs increase exponentially across time. Optimally, a small cost-effective force capable of developing solutions to intelligence gaps could provide a strong actor with a solution to the dilemma of targeting the unseen.

Closely linked to the economic viability of an actor is the power and size of the actor's military. Possessing a military that is strong enough to guarantee military victory ebbs and flows with the perceived threats to the actor in question. Generally speaking, when perceived threats to the security of the actor in question are high, the military generally flourishes; when perceived threats subside, the military will generally shrink in size and lose capability. This is evident in the current political, economic, and social situation in the United States. As the perceived threat to U.S. security has dwindled and the United States removes itself from theaters of conflict, the military shrinks and along with it, so does the military's capability.

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<sup>36</sup> Paul, Clarke, Grill, and Dunigan, *Paths to Victory*, xxxi.

<sup>37</sup> It is important to note this study focused only on counter-insurgency (COIN) case studies following World War II and not all forms of irregular warfare were included. The report analyzed 71 separate instances of COIN for the report. The report focuses primarily on insurgency and COIN as a tactic and does not analyze strategic interactions between actors.

#### **4. Importance of the Objectives**

The last factor affecting the decision for choosing a strategy concerns the importance of the object. Specifically, does the threat affect the survival of the actor or its allies? If the survival of the actor is in question, then the importance of the objective will be high and have the support of the people. If the survival of the actor is not in question, then the importance of the objective will generally be lower and support for the conflict will be more likely to waiver.

For a strong actor, national survival will rarely be at stake in an indirect conflict (against a strong or weak actor). Arreguín-Toft's research demonstrates that indirect approaches to conflicts are becoming more and more common. Therefore, in most cases, strong actors are less willing to fight and less willing to risk large expenditures of national treasure in a conflict that has relatively low importance for them.

#### **B. IMPLICATIONS**

The previous section has organized the elements that should affect the decision to choose an indirect strategy. What does it mean and what are the implications if a strong actor finds that it must engage another actor in conflict and the stronger actor has significantly limited resources due to reduced political will or reduced freedom of maneuver, and the importance of the objective is less than vital? This chapter suggests the strong actor should engage in an indirect strategic interaction with its adversary (if the adversary is using an indirect strategic interaction) to increase the likelihood of success. In an indirect conflict, the strong actor must optimize their diminished freedom of maneuver to achieve a higher probability of success.

#### **C. COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE IN INDIRECT STRATEGIES**

Militaries around the world have executed indirect strategies since wars have been fought. Both conventional militaries and special operations forces have been used to execute indirect strategies. However, there are certain characteristics that make certain units particularly adept at implementing indirect strategic approaches. While this thesis has argued, based on Arreguín-Toft and Beaufre's findings, that the strategy choice is

important to the outcome of a conflict, this thesis also assumes that the type of unit chosen to execute the strategy is equally as important. This section will cover the basic differences between U.S. conventional forces and U.S. Army Special Forces to include their nature, comparative advantages, and risks associated with employing each unit. Ultimately, this section will identify which unit is best suited for executing an indirect strategy against a weak actor who is executing an indirect strategy under the conditions described in the hypothesis in Chapter I.

The nature of indirect conflict has been covered earlier in this chapter. To reiterate, this type of warfare is typically protracted, political, unorthodox, and aimed at attacking the will of an adversary to continue to fight. To understand whether conventional forces or USSF is better suited to accomplish an indirect strategy, one must first derive the strategic value of each unit. This section will focus on understanding the strategic value of each unit.

Conventional military forces are often capable of executing an indirect strategy within an asymmetric conflict. Since 2001 and the initial invasion of Afghanistan and with the subsequent invasion in Iraq, the U.S. saw conventional military forces engaged in asymmetric warfare with an enemy ultimately using an indirect strategy. Conventional forces have moved along the spectrum of conflict from engaging in a direct strategy against enemy forces to executing large-scale indirect strategies in the form of counter insurgency (COIN) throughout both conflicts. Conventional military forces have met both success and failure while engaged in these theaters. To understand the strategic value of conventional forces we must look at the nature of the force, the advantages conventional forces offer, and the risk associated with this type of force in an indirect conflict.

Conventional forces are equipped and trained to fight and win wars by directly engaging the military forces of the enemy. An example of this sentiment is apparent in the United States Army Armor Branch's mission statement listed on the Maneuver Center of Excellence's (MCoE) website:

The Armor School trains, educates and inspires soldiers and leaders in fulfilling the obligations of the Army profession, to be critical and creative

thinkers, and to close with and destroy the enemy by fire and movement as part of a combined arms team in a complex environment and against a hybrid threat; thereby fostering the development of adaptable and lethal combat and reconnaissance and security formation in support of the operating force.<sup>38</sup>

While this mission statement is associated only with the U.S. Armor Branch, much can be extracted from the statement about conventional forces. This mission statement captures the essence of the nature of conventional military forces. That nature is to engage enemies of the United States in direct combat, to close with and destroy the enemy, and to do so quickly. Elements of this can also be seen in the U.S. Army publication ADP 3-0, Unified Land Operations. While this publication is focused on creating an army that is adaptive and agile, capable of conducting any type of warfare, the manual points out the importance of the physical destruction of the enemy, and how that task is the foundation of all military operations.<sup>39</sup> This idea supports the fact that the true nature of conventional forces is still based on direct conflict that is symmetrical. This does not mean that conventional forces cannot execute an indirect military strategy; this only indicates that conventional forces can struggle with implementing an indirect strategy as it is contrary to their nature. Large formations that are ill suited to conduct indirect operations can undermine one's own objectives due to increased resource expenditure for a questionable return of investment. Furthermore, large conventional formations create expectations for a quick victory, thereby shortening the timeline for operations that may require extended interaction with local people. Finally, having many U.S. "boots on the ground" can undermine the legitimacy of the operation and host nation authorities.<sup>40</sup>

United States Army Special Forces offer policy makers a unique tool to execute an indirect strategy against and adversary using the same strategy. Their small size, economy of force, specialized training, and regional expertise make them well suited to

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<sup>38</sup> U.S. Army Armor School website, Mission Statement, December 6, 2013, <http://www.benning.army.mil/armor/index.html>.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Army, "ADP 3-0 Unified Land Operations." (2011).

<sup>40</sup> Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 35.

implement an indirect strategy. According to the U.S. Army Field Manual FM 3–18, Special Forces Operations:

Special Forces operations have also proven to be an extremely useful option for certain situations during peacetime and contingencies, where the use of large military units and operations would have been inappropriate, counterproductive, or too risky. When used effectively, these types of operations can yield disproportional benefits.<sup>41</sup>

This statement gets at the heart of the hypothesis of this thesis in that Special Forces offer policy makers a valuable tool to respond to indirect threats with an indirect strategy. FM 3–18 further elaborates on the type of soldiers who populate Special Forces teams. In general, Special Forces soldiers are independent, adaptable, mature, innovative, culturally aware, self-assured, and self-reliant individuals who can be used to expand the strategic options for the NCA for conflict resolution.<sup>42</sup> USSF's economy of force reduces the risk of escalating a conflict that the mere presence of conventional forces may promulgate.<sup>43</sup>

This section has attempted to identify the primary differences in capabilities and the nature of both conventional forces and Special Forces. This section's intent was to identify the situations that are best suited for the utilization of each type of force. By conducting a cursory examination of U.S. Army doctrine, it appears that U.S. Special Forces selects, trains, and organizes units that are more capable of implementing an indirect strategy in support of policy goals. While both entities have been shown capable of implementing indirect strategies, it appears that USSF may be better suited for this type of strategy.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> U.S. Army, "FM 3–18 Special Forces Operations." (2012), 1–2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 1–10.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Critiques of this hypothesis exist. Paraphrasing James D. Kiras in the book *Special Operations and Strategy*, special operations and specifically Special Forces can be extremely effective when used in an indirect strategy, but should not be separated from conventional forces and more often than not, should be in a supporting role to conventional forces. Kiras acknowledges the need for an indirect strategy through what Kiras calls the "cumulative effect against the moral resolve of the enemy," but he does not acknowledge that special operations and more specifically Special Forces would be better suited for this type of warfare in a supported role as opposed to a supporting role to conventional forces.

This section has shown that indirect warfare is on the rise and that an indirect strategy applied by a stronger actor statistically increases that actor's likelihood of success when encountering a threat employing an indirect strategy. In addition, this section has shown that USSF are better suited than conventional forces to implement an indirect strategy. Conventional forces possess capabilities that are designed to close with and destroy the enemy. Confrontations between known combatants where military power can be used at a decisive point to degrade or destroy the enemy lies at the heart of what conventional forces are designed to accomplish. However, today's threats are not particularly vulnerable to traditional military power.

USSF are a small-scale and cost-effective alternative specifically designed to use indirect strategies to solve complex problems, assuming that USSF are employed correctly. USSF provide a tool that can accomplish policy objectives where conventional forces cannot operate effectively. USSF possess the ability to achieve strategic effects while maintaining a small footprint that mitigates the political and economic costs of waging war. It is important to note that Special Forces will not always be the best choice for indirect strategies nor will they always be successful. As demonstrated in the last 15 years of fighting during the global war on terror (GWOT), USSF can be improperly employed. As an example, USSF with well-trained commando partners provided extremely capable and agile elements to respond to emerging local and regional crises. These combined elements were used in Afghanistan and Iraq as direct action forces executing surgical strike missions.<sup>45</sup> USSF has a key role to ensure they are properly employed. Recent years of fighting in both Iraq and Afghanistan have seen Special Forces conducting more direct than indirect strategic approaches. USSF must carefully consider their mission to maximize strategic utility in an indirect context. The next chapter will better explain why USSF are better suited to implement indirect strategies by

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<sup>45</sup> The author observed this action during a deployment as a Special Forces Officer from 2008-2009 to Regional Command East in Afghanistan. While working with NATO Special Operations Forces the author observed USSF assigned to the Operation ENDURING FREEDOM U.S. mission perform this mission. USSF with Afghan Commandos operated as a strike force in Regional Command East conducting direct action raids against Taliban strongholds. They were used more and more for their flexibility and speed to react.



focusing on the organization and primary missions of USSF. This will show the reader why USSF have a comparative advantage over conventional forces in the indirect role.

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### **III. SPECIAL FORCES**

The previous chapter describes the rise of indirect threats, the need for a strong actor to develop indirect strategies to counter those threats, and the need of possessing military units capable of implementing indirect strategies. This chapter focuses on the type of unit needed to implement a successful indirect strategy against an indirect threat. Specifically, this chapter will focus on United States Army Special Forces (USSF) as a means to implement an indirect strategy. This chapter will begin by providing a brief history of USSF to understand of how the unit was designed and for what purpose it was intended to be used. Next, the focus will shift from the historical context to the modern use of Special Forces. The current responsibility for missions directed by the U.S. Department of Defense will be outlined with a particular focus on Unconventional Warfare (UW) and Foreign Internal Defense (FID). Even though USSF have requirements to fill many roles, these two missions will be emphasized due to their connection to executing indirect strategies. Finally, this chapter will analyze USSF's utility in an indirect strategy and determine if USSF possess any advantage over conventional forces within the context of indirect strategies.

#### **A. HISTORY**

To understand how USSF can be appropriately used to implement an indirect strategy it is necessary to first gain a brief understanding of the history of the unit and the intention behind its original design. By gaining a better understanding of USSF's past, their current employment and potential can be better understood.

The United States Army Special Forces officially began in 1951 due to the rising communist threat during the Cold War and the need for a force capable of executing Unconventional Warfare (UW) to counter Soviet attempts to expand their influence into Western Europe.<sup>46</sup> However, USSF lineage can be traced back before World War II. At

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<sup>46</sup> Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1997), 11.

the beginning of World War II, the U.S. military did not possess a special operations capability that would allow the United States to take part in irregular warfare. Unlike Great Britain, the U.S. did not possess an established structure that could focus on conducting psychological operations, sabotage, subversion, or espionage.<sup>47</sup> William Donovan, a proven World War I officer, successfully lobbied President Roosevelt to create an organization that could fill this capability gap.<sup>48</sup> The organization that was created was the Office of Strategic Services (OSS).<sup>49</sup> To paraphrase Susan Marquis' version of Donovan's original mission statement; the OSS' mission was to use any means available to destroy the enemy's will to fight and disrupt his political and economic ability to engage in warfare. Additionally, the OSS was to conduct military operations, to include psychological warfare, to deny an enemy support from its allies while maximizing one's own support and increasing the friendly actor's will to fight.<sup>50</sup> In other words, the OSS was focused on undermining support to an enemy while increasing friendly support to affect each actor's will to fight. Once Donovan was able to organize the OSS, the unit quickly began operating throughout the European theater of operations. During the course of the war, the OSS deployed 97 separate teams into Europe and achieved much success.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, the OSS successfully established a unit in the India, China, and Burma theaters of operation. Detachment 101 was established to conduct UW throughout Burma, to undermine the occupation of the Japanese military in that theater. Detachment 101 achieved a high degree of success executing an indirect strategy in support of the war effort.

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<sup>47</sup> Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces*, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Susan Marquis indicates in her book, *Unconventional Warfare*, which the British possessed a capability that could conduct tasks associated with indirect strategies. William Donovan wished to create an organization that was modeled after the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) that could conduct unconventional warfare in denied areas to support the war effort. The effort was not initially widely supported by the military and President Roosevelt had to intervene personally in order to get the effort off of the ground.

<sup>49</sup> Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces*, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

This new and highly successful special operations capability would not last long. After the war, the OSS deactivated and the U.S. would not possess a unit with the specific capability of implementing an indirect strategy through UW until well into the conflict in Korea. Even after the establishment of a Special Forces unit, the unit was not used in Korea to carry out UW missions. However, there were individual units conducting special operations in the Korea theater of operations, but no unified effort to maintain an indirect capability. It was not until 1951 that Aaron Bank and Russell Volkmann began to rebuild the U.S. Army's special warfare capability and created the first Special Forces unit, 10th Special Forces Group (SFG). According to Marquis, 10th Special Forces Group's initial mission statement written by Bank and Volkmann was to, "infiltrate by air, sea, or land deep into enemy-controlled territory and to stay, organize, equip, train, control, and direct indigenous personnel in the conduct of Special Forces Operations."<sup>52</sup>

The creation of the 10th Special Forces Group marked the official birth of modern USSF. The organizational design, centered on a 12-man team concept called Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs), has remained unchanged since the creation of the 10th SFG. Positions and specialties on the teams have changed somewhat due to operational need, but the original concept of having regionally aligned small units, consisting of highly trained individuals and maintaining the capability to conduct unconventional warfare has remained largely unchanged.<sup>53</sup>

It is apparent from both mission statements above that USSF and its predecessors were created to conduct warfare that sought indirect confrontations against the United States' enemies. Although Donovan's mission statement for the OSS is extensive and contrasts with Bank and Volkmann's mission statement that is rather short and vague, it

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<sup>52</sup> Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Volumes have been written on the complete history of Special Forces. This section of the thesis only gives an overview of some of the critical points in USSF's creation. The intent is to give the reader some sense of the purpose of creating and maintaining such a unit. The purpose of USSF as used in this thesis is to conduct UW and FID as a way to implement an indirect strategy in support of national policy goals to reduce the enemy's freedom of maneuver and increase or at least maximize the use of the friendly freedom of maneuver.

is evident from both statements that the role of each unit was to reduce the will of the enemy to fight and increase the will of friendly indigenous forces to fight. This statement resonates closely with what Beaufre indicates as when choosing an indirect strategy. That is to reduce the political and economic space in which the enemy can operate, while maximizing the use of friendly space. This should be thought of in terms of freedom of maneuver.<sup>54</sup>

## **B. MODERN USSF MISSION**

To gain a thorough understanding of how USSF can be employed within the context of an indirect strategy, this section of the chapter will define Special Forces' current mission. Additionally, this section will define and analyze USSF's two primary missions and how those missions represent indirect strategies. By understanding these missions, the nature and the role of USSF can be understood and thus a better vision of how USSF can be used against indirect threats will emerge.

*U.S. Army Field Manual 3-18, Special Forces Operations states:*

United States Army Special Forces is the Department of Defense's only force specifically trained and educated to shape foreign political and military environments by working through and with host nations...Special Forces Soldiers possess capabilities that enable both lethal and nonlethal missions specifically designed to shape the environment, deter conflict, prevail in war, or succeed in a wide range of contingency operations.<sup>55</sup>

By doctrine, USSF is specifically designed to shape the political and military environment during war, conflict, or peacetime engagement. USSF provides the NCA with a specifically trained force capable of implementing both direct and indirect strategies in a variety of ways. USSF provides the capability to implement national security strategies outside of overt conventional military campaigns, acts as a force multiplier and enabler in support of military campaigns, and can be used in an economy

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<sup>54</sup> Beaufre explains in his book, *An Introduction to Strategy*, that freedom of maneuver is a variable in selecting a strategy. This thesis assumes that increasing or decreasing freedom of maneuver also can be used in determining if an indirect strategy as a means of conflict resolution is suitable. Beaufre does not specifically state this in his book, but is a key assumption to this thesis.

<sup>55</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, "(FM 3-18) Special Forces Operations." (2012), 1-1.

of force role.<sup>56</sup> Due to the unit's small size and unique capabilities, USSF provide the NCA with a capability to respond to indirect threats that is low risk, unlike that of a large-scale deployment of conventional forces.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, the nature of the Special Forces Soldier facilitates lower visibility, indirect strategies. The type of soldier that is recruited, selected, and trained to be a member of Special Forces defines the nature of the force. The USSF Soldier is a mature, innovative, independent, and capable of working with indigenous civilian populations and military forces to support U.S. national interests.<sup>58</sup> With soldiers possessing highly developed skills and organized into small units, USSF provide the NCA with a tool optimized for executing an indirect strategy against an indirect threat.

USSF missions consist of a wide array of tasks and activities that are designed to support the United States' national security strategy. The missions span the spectrum of warfare ranging from offensive, defensive, and stability operations. However, two missions stand out that serve as the cornerstone of Special Forces operations since the beginnings of the unit's history. These missions are Unconventional Warfare (UW) and Foreign Internal Defense (FID) and both missions comfortably fall within the realm of indirect strategies. While each mission can be conducted in support of a direct strategy, the nature of both UW and FID are more indirect and are intended to achieve results that are disproportionate to the size of the unit that is involved.<sup>59</sup> UW and FID are considered by U.S. Army Field Manual FM 3-18 to be conceptual opposites. UW focuses on the use of a resistance force to overthrow an occupying power while FID is focused on enabling governments to protect themselves and their people from subversion, insurgency, terrorism, and lawlessness.<sup>60</sup> The following sections will define both UW and FID in more detail, and then explain how each mission uses an indirect strategy.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>57</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, "(FM 3-18) Special Forces Operations" (2012), 1-3.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 2-2.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 2-8.

## 1. Unconventional Warfare

UW served as the catalyst for the creation of the OSS and serves presently as the backbone of the United States Army Special Forces. Unconventional warfare directed against the Soviets is the reason that USSF was created.<sup>61</sup> UW is one of USSF nine core competencies or missions and is defined in U.S. Army Techniques Publication ATP 3–05.1 as:

Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.<sup>62</sup>

UW was initially designed to weaken and disrupt an occupying power to facilitate its overthrow. The OSS used UW in Europe and Burma during World War II to disrupt the Axis Powers and to facilitate conventional operations leading up to D-Day and beyond. UW today is still oriented at the disruption of an occupying power or enemy government. According to Army Techniques Publication ATP 3–05.1, the complexities of the current and future operational environments, along with the diffusion of power from nation states to the many stakeholders involved in the international community, has resulted in an environment whereby traditional military and economic elements of national power may be less effective or even inappropriate for achieving U.S. policy goals.<sup>63</sup> The eventual aim of a UW campaign is to overthrow or at a minimum disrupt an enemy or occupying force using an indirect strategy. Stated in more simple terms, UW as a primary method to deny a threat actor's freedom of maneuver and to capitalize on one's own freedom of maneuver. Since UW is typically conducted in denied areas or through surrogates in denied areas, it is assumed that in a situation where UW is needed, the United States' freedom of maneuver will be restricted to some degree. Due to this restriction, the U.S. needs to effectively and efficiently use the strategic space available;

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<sup>61</sup> USASOC, *ARSOF 2022* (FT. Bragg, NC: USAJFKSWCS Office of Strategic Communication), 13.

<sup>62</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, "(ATP 3–05.1) Special Forces Unconventional Warfare." (2013), 1–1.

<sup>63</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, "(ATP 3–05.1) Special Forces Unconventional Warfare." (2013), 1–2.



both physically and politically, while denying the same to its enemy. This makes UW an ideal tool to use within the framework of an indirect strategy as it seeks to undermine the will of the enemy to fight while increasing or at least maintaining one's own will to fight.

## **2. Foreign Internal Defense**

FM 3-18 defines FID as the following:

Participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government or other designated organization to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security.<sup>64</sup>

The primary intent of FID is to stabilize an actor/government from within and prevent an enemy from undermining the actor's will to resist.<sup>65</sup> As stated previously, FID is the conceptual opposite of UW. UW is a mission that is unique to USSF alone. This is not the case with FID. Conventional forces along with Special Operations Forces (SOF) can conduct FID. However, USSF possesses a unique advisory capability and regional expertise that conventional forces do not have, allowing USSF to conduct FID with a unique cultural understanding that is not present in conventional forces. As indicated in U.S. Army Field Manual FM 3-18, FID is conducted during both times of peace and conflict and consists of indirect support to an actor that can include training exercises, limited direct military assistance, and advisory operations.<sup>66</sup> In addition, conventional military forces are not trained and organized to conduct FID. FID requires conventional military forces to focus on tasks not related to their primary function.

FID is closely related to UW. It is a mission that can be conducted to support a strategy that is either offensive or defensive in nature. FID conducted by USSF offers

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<sup>64</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, "(FM 3-18) Special Forces Operations." (2012), 2-8.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

policy makers another tool to implement an indirect strategy in support of policy objectives that is low risk for both the U.S. and the host nation.<sup>67</sup>

### **3. Special Forces Use in an Indirect Strategy**

Now that there is a general understanding of USSF's history and missions, the question of how USSF fits into the context of an indirect strategy must be addressed. USSF gives the NCA indirect options by providing an economical force, which occupies a small footprint, and potentially delivers a disproportionate return on investment compared to conventional forces. Both missions can be conducted overtly or clandestinely and clearly fall within the realm of an indirect strategy.<sup>68</sup> UW is aimed at undermining the freedom of maneuver of an enemy while capitalizing on the maneuver space made available to friendly forces while FID is aimed at creating and expanding a friendly forces freedom of maneuver prior to and during a conflict. Each mission is designed to be used as an indirect approach against an enemy when a conventional, direct approach is not a viable option. USSF utilizing UW or FID provide the NCA with options when resources are limited, when the survival of the United States is not at risk, and when reduced freedom of maneuver exists based on the political or geographic complexities of the conflict. USSF has a clear comparative advantage over conventional forces within the previously described context. Not only is USSF more palatable to policy makers due to their low visibility, but there is reduced risk of a conflict escalating when USSF is used to perform UW or FID in support of an indirect strategy.

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<sup>67</sup> It is important to note that both UW and FID are much more complex and detailed than is described here. The missions described here are general overviews consisting of broad generalizations intended to give the reader a cursory understanding of USSF's capabilities. Both UW and FID consists of many different phases and both contain different missions that support the overall mission itself. These definitions simply offer a broad context from which USSF's contribution to an indirect strategy can be understood.

<sup>68</sup> USSF operations are highly dependent on external support. It should be noted that this thesis assumes that Special Forces unit conducting FID or UW in an indirect strategic context will be highly integrated with other elements of military and inter-agency community.

## IV. CASE-STUDY ANALYSIS

This thesis seeks to test the hypothesis and answer the research question: Do United States Special Forces (USSF) offer U.S. policy makers an effective and efficient alternative, to conventional military forces in achieving policy goals. The conditions under which USSF can be used in an indirect approach are examined using Beaufre's metrics for freedom of maneuver, relative available resources, and the importance of the objective. In this chapter, three cases in which USSF were used to achieve policy goals—in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Philippines—are analyzed. These conflicts are examined from the U.S. perspective, using a model of strategic interaction with the adversary (direct vs. direct, direct vs. indirect, etc.) and Beaufre's metrics. The chapter concludes with identifying conditions where USSF has a potential strategic advantage.

### A. AFGHANISTAN

On September 11, 2001, the method by which the United States conducts warfare changed significantly if briefly. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, forced the United States into a conflict-resolution paradigm for which it was unprepared. A highly visible, complex attack was perpetrated on American soil by a non-state actor using asymmetric means,<sup>69</sup> creating a paradigm shift for which that the DOD was unable to devise an immediate response to meet the urgent requirements of the commander in chief. As planning efforts began, it became clear that any countermove would take months to craft and execute.<sup>70</sup> Planning initiatives began in Central Command, the DOD's geographical combatant command—a bureaucratic, conventional military organization that is responsible for operations and activities within Afghanistan. Concurrently, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was preparing intelligence assets, CIA paramilitary teams, local Afghan opposition, and

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<sup>69</sup> Hy S. Rothstein, *Afghanistan & the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

USSF for an unconventional-warfare operation.<sup>71</sup> The United States could not mobilize and employ a conventional military response to Afghanistan quickly enough. The CIA plan required the support of USSF teams and represented the quickest and most capable response option available. This specialized response element proved to be agile and extremely effective in defeating Al Qaeda and the Taliban in the opening days of the conflict in Afghanistan.

By September 26, agents of the CIA made it to Afghanistan and began laying the groundwork for the intelligence plan.<sup>72</sup> Over the next few months, and until the disruption of the Taliban in December 2001, the U.S. actually waged a direct conflict against a state actor employing a direct-conflict methodology. The U.S. fielded a wide array of aerial attack tools, including cruise-missile strikes and precision bombing, guided by the U.S.-advised Afghan Northern Alliance, against a conventionally arrayed enemy using a direct approach.<sup>73</sup> Members of the 5th Special Forces Group were deployed to Afghanistan with simple instructions: link up with the Northern Alliance and capture Kabul.<sup>74</sup> The success that SOF achieved between October and December was significant. The Taliban, initially a conventional military force, attempted to fight the combined U.S. and Northern Alliance in a classic direct approach. The U.S. excelled in targeting a visible enemy and was happy to exchange blows at an exponentially higher operating cost to the Taliban. By November, Kabul had fallen and the Taliban were on the run.<sup>75</sup> The victory was short lived. After their disintegration in December 2001, the remnants of the Taliban slowly changed their conflict methodology.<sup>76</sup> However, the U.S. failed to adapt to the shifting paradigm. The Army's 10th Mountain Division headquarters, typically responsible for the command and control of a conventional light-

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<sup>71</sup> Rothstein, *Afghanistan & the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare*, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 12–13.

<sup>74</sup> Linda Robinson, *Masters Of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 156.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 13.

infantry division of approximately 10,000 soldiers, was deployed to Afghanistan to command and control all military operations within the country.<sup>77</sup> The Special Forces warfighters on the ground now had two additional levels of approval to gain permission to confront the enemy. As Hy S. Rothstein indicates in *Afghanistan and the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare*, “As the war became increasingly unconventional, the command and control arrangements became more conventional.”<sup>78</sup> The war was being managed by an organization that had no means to see an enemy that blended into the population, targeted the U.S. effectively, and out-paced the United States decision-making and execution processes.

## **1. Conflict Interaction**

Afghanistan presented evolving hybrid conflict interactions as the character of the conflict changed.<sup>79</sup> Hostilities began, as a hybrid, interstate conflict between states, the U.S. and the Taliban-governed Afghanistan. State on state war morphed into a counter-insurgency, with the United States in the lead, fighting a non-state actor.<sup>80</sup> The conflict methodology used by the U.S. from October 2001–December 2001 was hybrid, consisting of direct and indirect approaches against the Taliban, who used direct approaches. The United States used highly qualified and capable small teams to degrade the conventionally arrayed Taliban to the point of near defeat—at which point the conflict morphed into an insurgency as the Taliban changed its strategic approach to indirect, blending into the population and employing insurgent tactics. Despite this change, the U.S. failed to adapt its conflict approach. From January 2002–June 2003, the

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<sup>77</sup> Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces*, 13.

<sup>78</sup> Rothstein, *Afghanistan & the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare*, 13.

<sup>79</sup> Interstate conflict, civil war, and insurgency are defined by John Arquilla, Heather S. Gregg, and H. S. Rothstein in *The Three Circles of War* and these terms are used to address conflict and the methods that those conflicts are addressed. Interstate conflict refers to classic conventional warfare typically conducted between two state actors. Insurgency is defined as a long-term struggle across diplomatic, information, military, and economic lines with the goal to gain political clout through non-standard means. Finally, civil war is a conflict between political entities looking to gain control in a country.

<sup>80</sup> The United States initially entered Afghanistan pursuing Al-Qaeda, the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks which is a non-state actor. However, the conflict quickly turned into a hybrid conflict against the Taliban. In 2001 the Taliban governed Afghanistan as a state actor and provided sanctuary to Osama bin Laden and AQ.

force structure in Afghanistan grew from just over 4,000 service members to almost 10,000, commanded by a conventional commander.<sup>81</sup> This drastic increase in forces, accompanied by a shift in command-and-control methods, degraded the very agile, specialized force capable of direct or indirect action and essentially replaced it with a less-agile force suited to direct conflict.

## **2. Freedom of Maneuver**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, marked the first time since World War II that the American homeland had been attacked on a large scale. The wounds inflicted that day united the government and public in demanding action against the perpetrators. Initially, the military enjoyed broad freedom of maneuver, politically and physically, to pursue and target Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the Taliban that supported them. This latitude diminished over time, for several reasons. First, the rationale for the war in Afghanistan was to bring the operatives that perpetrated the 9/11 attacks to justice. In February 2002, a U.S. military contingent missed the opportunity to kill or capture Osama Bin Laden in the mountains around Shi-e-Kot, Afghanistan, during Operation Anaconda, a hammer-and-anvil operation devised by the 10th Mountain Division.<sup>82</sup> “The U.S. military attempted to apply a direct solution against an unconventional enemy much like it did in Vietnam. In fact, it handed al Qaeda a moral victory, with many escaping or staying hidden.”<sup>83</sup>

This missed opportunity was costly, allowing the Taliban and Al Qaeda to regroup and adjust their conflict approach thereby providing the second reason for the U.S.’s diminished freedom of maneuver.

Following Operation Anaconda, the enemy no longer engaged directly. For the remainder of the war, the Taliban fought through indirect, small-scale attacks that slowly eroded the U.S. will to fight and left policymakers and the public restless. The early

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<sup>81</sup> Rothstein, *Afghanistan & the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare*, 109.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 168.

triumph in Afghanistan brought the conflict into the spotlight,<sup>84</sup> but the public subsequently saw the war drag on, with troop numbers increasing by about 6,000 from 2002–2003 and increasing casualty rates due to the adversary’s indirect strategy. The cost of blood and treasure without any measureable success frustrated the American people and reduced the U.S. will to continue the fight. A conflict between the last remaining world superpower and a small organization with limited regional power ultimately became America’s longest war, which continues nearly fifteen years later.

Over time, the failure of the United States to kill or capture Osama bin Laden, defeat the Taliban, and wrap up the war reduced freedom of maneuver to pursue policy goals in Afghanistan. The introduction of large-scale conventional forces started a timer on political will. Conventional boots on the ground represented a very large investment by the United States and, without commensurate large-scale gains, created disappointment that eventually undermined political will, policy goals, and freedom of maneuver, due to conspicuous mishandling of the military instrument of national power.<sup>85</sup>

### **3. Resource Allocation**

Early on, the U.S. military enjoyed nearly unlimited willingness to expend resources on the conflict in Afghanistan. A massive terrorist attack had resolved the nation and its allies to commit military resources against Al Qaeda and their affiliates; the day after 9/11, the DOD was working on plans to send conventional units to Afghanistan.<sup>86</sup> Preliminary concepts from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff called for a base in Uzbekistan, supplied by sixty-seven massive cargo aircraft to move the supplies needed for an air campaign.<sup>87</sup> This aggressive planning in the immediate aftermath of the attacks illustrates that budgetary considerations were not a limitation in creating a military response. The NCA and the public demanded reprisals and were

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<sup>84</sup> Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces*, 188.

<sup>85</sup> Rothstein, *Afghanistan & the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare*, 171.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 9.

willing to pay for them. As the military failed to decapitate AQ, hope of a rapid resolution dimmed in the months that followed the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Resources allocation changed when the war in Iraq began, in March 2003.<sup>88</sup> With the priority on Iraq and waning political will for Afghanistan, resource allocation was significantly reduced.

#### **4. The Importance of the Objective**

The importance of the objective in Afghanistan followed a similar trajectory to resource allocation. Afghanistan itself was not of critical importance to the U.S., but pursuing Al Qaeda and affiliates was deemed critical to national security, and Afghanistan exported terrorism.<sup>89</sup> This thesis views the war in Afghanistan as a hybrid case. The survival of the U.S. may never have been in question, but the importance of the objective was nevertheless initially high; and as costs increased and the fight continued, the perceived importance of the objective waned. After the invasion of Iraq, Afghanistan became an “economy of force” effort.

#### **5. Analysis**

Owing to the surprising and devastating nature of the 9/11 attacks, those pursuing policy objectives in Afghanistan experienced complete political freedom of maneuver but limited capability to respond conventionally. Conventional forces could not respond rapidly enough and the U.S. was forced to use a smaller, specialized force in the form of the CIA and USSF to meet policy demands. Over time, political freedom became restricted while the flow of resources into Afghanistan increased, at least until the war in Iraq began.

Similarly, the willingness of the government and people to commit resources was almost unlimited in the beginning. As expectations that U.S. power advantages would

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<sup>88</sup> John Arquilla, Heather S. Gregg, and Hy S. Rothstein, *Three Circles of War: Understanding The Dynamics of Conflict in Iraq*, ed. Heather S. Gregg, Hy S. Rothstein, and John Arquilla (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2010), 5.

<sup>89</sup> Rothstein, *Afghanistan & the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare*, 166.



quickly defeat Al Qaeda and the Taliban were dashed, government and public willingness to commit resources to a frustrating conflict declined. While the importance of the objective was at first regarded as extremely high, despite no existential threat to national survival, the lack of decisive gains diminished the objective's importance, especially as a much larger and costlier conflict in Iraq expanded.

After March 2003, freedom of maneuver became limited in Afghanistan, committing and expending further resources was unpalatable to those in power due to the high blood and treasure costs.<sup>90</sup> Ultimately, the objective lost importance. These factors effectively tied the hands of those striving for policy resolution in Afghanistan. Evolving policy and popular will created a situation in which NCA strategic goals could not be achieved and the environment became so confining that any military action taken, however successful, reaped negative consequences.

In 2009, in a speech delivered at West Point, the President Barack Obama announced the plan to surge U.S. military forces to Afghanistan to reverse the stalemate that plagued Afghanistan from 2007–2008.<sup>91</sup> Under this plan, the president outlined three objectives intended to defeat Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and to protect America and its allies from future Al Qaeda attacks:<sup>92</sup>

1. Deny Al Qaeda a safe haven in Afghanistan
2. Reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny its ability to overthrow the Afghan government.
3. Build capacity of Afghan security forces and the government.

To achieve these objectives, the surge increased U.S. military forces in Afghanistan from approximately 41,000 to 100,000 troops. Monetary expenditures increased from 48

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<sup>90</sup> The announcement of the surge was a halfhearted gesture as the withdrawal of U.S. troops was simultaneously announced. The surge created political maneuver space for the President of the U.S. to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan with honor. The surge had little to do with achieving policy goals.

<sup>91</sup> Joseph J. Collins, "Afghan Surge: Rapid Exit or Better Peace?," *Small Wars Journal* (July 15, 2014): <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/25/the-afghan-surge-is-over>.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

billion dollars from 2007–2009 to 109 billion dollars from 2010–2012.<sup>93</sup> An arbitrary drawdown was announced to begin in the summer of 2011 with the surge. The surge's focus was to create freedom of maneuver in a campaign that had been neglected since the invasion of Iraq.

The surge appears to have created limited success in terms of the objectives outlined by the president, but did not change the negatively trending security environment overall. The Taliban, who were not a threat to national security, were pushed out of parts of central Afghanistan, but remained a viable threat along the border of Pakistan and remained capable of threatening the central government in Kabul. Although the U.S. did eventually kill Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda remained a viable, though reduced threat to the U.S. and its allies. With the announcement of an arbitrary withdrawal date, a visible timeline limited U.S. chances of achieving success.<sup>94</sup> The surge exhausted the American public's already thin patience with the Afghan war, further reducing U.S. freedom of maneuver.<sup>95</sup> Ironically, the reduction in freedom of maneuver has forced the U.S. into a more indirect strategic interaction in Afghanistan and may force the U.S. to adopt an approach with a higher probability of success.

## **B. IRAQ**

Planning for the intervention in Iraq began in the fall of 2001, when Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld directed Central Command to develop a strategy to unseat Saddam Hussein.<sup>96</sup> Planners counted on the experience gained in the first Iraq war and anticipated that after defeating the Iraqi forces, a quick transition would occur, in which Hussein would be removed, civil authority would be handed to a friendly Iraqi entity, and

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "The Afghan Surge is Over," *Foreign Policy*, (September 25, 2012): <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/25/the-afghan-surge-is-over/>.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Richard R. Brennan, Jr., Charles P. Ries, Larry Hanauer, Ben Connable, Terrence K. Kelly, Michael J. McNerney, Stephanie Young, Jason Campbell, and K. Scott McMahon, *Ending The U.S. War In Iraq: The Final Transition, Operational Maneuver, and Disestablishment of the United States Forces-Iraq* (Santa Monica :RAND Corporation, 2013), 22.

the U.S. would focus on helping rebuild Iraq.<sup>97</sup> Thus, the DOD never developed a serious plan for conflict termination and the withdrawal of major combat forces from Iraq.<sup>98</sup> However, the Department of State anticipated tough post-conflict challenges and developed plans that complemented DOD's, but were not collaborative.

The DOS believed that post-Hussein reconstruction in Iraq would be complex and messy. In January 2003, National Security Presidential Directive 24 (NSPD 24) resolved these divergent opinions by calling on the DOD to establish an office for reconstruction and humanitarian assistance, to be led by a retired Army general reporting directly to the secretary of defense. Conditions were set for a very conventional, direct conflict to invade Iraq, secure Baghdad, and replace Hussein.<sup>99</sup> On March 20, 2003, the U.S.-led coalition attacked Iraq. By April 30—less than six weeks from the introduction of forces—the invasion was complete and the U.S. unexpectedly found itself in a rapidly changing environment for which it was not prepared.<sup>100</sup> Ultimately, this case study will show that the U.S. did not adapt its strategic approach to the burgeoning insurgency. The U.S. reticence to change its approach and the continued use of large-scale conventional forces executing a direct strategic interaction contributed to U.S. failure to achieve its policy goals.

## **1. Conflict Interaction**

The conflict in Iraq evolved, exhibiting three types of warfare—conventional, insurgency, and civil—each of which called for a different methodology for resolution.<sup>101</sup> What started as an interstate, conventional war quickly turned into an insurgency once the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>98</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq," *Special Warfare Magazine*, 17, no. 2: (December 2004): 6.

<sup>99</sup> Brennan, Ries, Hanauer, Connable, Kelly, McNerney, Young, Campbell, and McMahon, *Ending The U.S. War In Iraq: The Final Transition, Operational Maneuver, and Disestablishment of the United States Forces-Iraq*, 22.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>101</sup> Arquilla, Gregg, and Rothstein, *The Three Circles of War: Understanding The Dynamics of Conflict in Iraq*, 5.

regime fell, and then into civil war.<sup>102</sup> At the conflict's inception, large formations of mechanized, motorized, and light infantry hammered it out with elements of the Iraqi army, while coalition airpower struck strategic targets to weaken the Iraqi military. After Hussein fell, the U.S. faced an insurgency that lasted until roughly 2006.<sup>103</sup> In that year, the U.S. became involved in an emerging civil war throughout the country, between Al Qaeda-affiliated Sunni elements and the predominant Iraqi Shia government. Unfortunately, the United States did not keep up with the constant evolving conflict. According to Gregg, Rothstein, and Arquilla in *The Three Circles of War*:

It appears that the U.S. strategy lagged behind the shifts in the Iraq conflict. We were still thinking largely in terms of interstate warfare through the first years of the insurgency and redirected ourselves toward counter-insurgency only after the conflict had moved from an insurgency to a fledgling civil war.<sup>104</sup>

This quote summarizes the strategy paradigm throughout the war—elements of all three conflict models existed and the U.S. therefore needed a comprehensive but agile strategy.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, the same type of approach was used in all three types of warfare. In the initial days of the invasion, the United States employed a strong, capable, conventional force against an Iraqi conventional force, using a direct approach. As the conflict transformed to an insurgency and the Iraqi army melted away, the U.S. military continued a direct approach. The insurgents saw the futility of standing toe to toe against overwhelming force. The U.S. found itself engaging with a direct approach while the adversary had switched to an indirect approach. The delayed identification of these changes allowed the insurgents to gain ground and advantage before the U.S. realized what was occurring.<sup>106</sup> It was not until 2007 that the U.S. began using counterinsurgency,

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>103</sup> Arquilla, Gregg, and Rothstein, *The Three Circles of War: Understanding The Dynamics of Conflict in Iraq*, 5.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Hoffman, *Special Warfare Magazine*, 7.

or COIN, as a methodology to counter the increasing violence. During this period, the conflict gave way to civil war.<sup>107</sup>

## **2. Freedom of Maneuver**

The conflict in Iraq was arguably an extension of the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and around the world. Though the war was not prosecuted in the direct aftermath of 9/11, the generally high political approval for removing Hussein resulted in significant freedom of maneuver for the U.S. Over time, however, the Iraq war, like the Afghan war, became unpopular. The will to continue shrank, due to elevated costs and the seeming endlessness of the conflict. Expectations for a quick resolution were quickly washed away by the growing insurgency and a civil war that cost over 4,000 American lives and required ever more resources and effort to create a stable security environment in which Iraq could be rebuilt. As the political will to carry on dissipated, the president vowed to remove all U.S. troops by 2011.<sup>108</sup> The U.S. and allies were forced to cease combat operations, due to restricted freedom of maneuver. World leaders, to include the President of the United States, ordered withdrawals of their forces. In the case of the U.S., this withdrawal came with a publicly known date, thereby severely limiting freedom of maneuver by the United States.

## **3. Resource Allocation**

Resource allocation for the war in Iraq began as nearly unlimited. As the conflict progressed from conventional conflict to an ambiguous and complex entanglement, the eagerness of the U.S. to invest in the conflict dissipated. The U.S. government began to feel the exasperation of the American people at continued expenditure of resources and a loss of 4,000-plus lives on a war that seemingly had no end. On August 31, 2010, the President of the United States announced the end of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and

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<sup>107</sup> Arquilla, Gregg, and Rothstein, *The Three Circles of War: Understanding The Dynamics of Conflict in Iraq*, 6.

<sup>108</sup> Brennan, Ries, Hanauer, Connable, Kelly, McNerney, Young, Campbell, and McMahon, *Ending The U.S. War In Iraq: The Final Transition, Operational Maneuver, and Disestablishment of the United States Forces-Iraq*, 330.

combat operations in Iraq.<sup>109</sup> This order was a direct result of the U.S. government, the new government of Iraq, and the world at large losing interest in continuing the war. All involved were reluctant to commit resources to an unpopular and uncertain war.

#### **4. The Importance of the Objective**

In the Iraq war, the importance of the objective is not as discernable as the other cases in this chapter. Initially, the importance of the objective was critical to the U.S. If Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, then Iraq posed a credible threat to the U.S. homeland and allies. The initial support garnered for the war effort developed from the notion that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) were present in Iraq and that they could be used by Iraq or other nefarious actors against the U.S. in retaliation for the now burgeoning war GWOT. U.S. intelligence on WMDs, which drove the invasion, proved wrong; thus, while the objective was originally perceived as extremely important and a major priority thus driving the requirement for a large-scale conventional intervention, that status deflated as weapons were not found. As the likelihood that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction dwindled, the importance of the objective decreased in the minds of supporters of the war in the U.S. government and in the American public. As a result, the war lost its justification.

#### **5. Analysis**

Iraq transitioned through three types of warfare during this conflict. The American public expected a quick and overwhelming victory based in part on historical expectations of the power of the U.S. military and the United States' experience against the Iraqi Army in the first Gulf War. The American expectation of an absolute power advantage, regardless of conflict type, vanished quickly as U.S. forces remained long after the president declared an end to major combat operations. Public support and

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<sup>109</sup> President Barack H. Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the End of Combat Operations in Iraq" (speech, Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC, August 31, 2010).

likewise, freedom of maneuver quickly waned as a result. The advantages the U.S. enjoyed early in 2003 were lost and withdrawal became the goal rather than victory.

Conflict interactions in Iraq began as direct conventional-warfare, with USSF playing a supporting role to conventional forces. The Iraqi Army responded directly and was routed by overwhelming force by the United States. Once the army was defeated, an insurgency emerged—and with it, indirect interaction by the insurgent. The United States continued using conventional forces directly, supported by USSF, to little effect. Through this interaction, the United States actually exacerbated conditions in Iraq, inadvertently encouraging a brewing civil war while slowly compromising the allies' ability to achieve policy objectives. In 2006, ethnic civil war developed, further complicating U.S. efforts to bring peace and order. DOD efforts to quell the insurgency and simultaneously stop the civil war began to take on an indirect mode, but the strategy was implemented and executed in a direct manner by conventional forces supported by USSF.

Insurgents in Iraq perceived the reduction in U.S. freedom to maneuver, allocation of resources, and the importance of the objective, and they exploited these conditions by adopting dynamic, indirect tactics well suited to wearing down a superior foe. Ultimately, the U.S. withdrew from Iraq, without achieving its goals.

### **C. THE PHILIPPINES**

While the United States took on Islamists in Afghanistan and toppled Saddam Hussein in Iraq, a quieter confrontation was ongoing in the Pacific theater, aimed at fighting terrorism. The conflict, in the Philippines targeted Al Qaeda affiliates Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah.<sup>110</sup> The U.S. mission in the Philippines became part of the rapidly expanding global war on terrorism known as Operation Enduring Freedom. American involvement in the Philippine conflict differed markedly from that in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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<sup>110</sup> Brian Petit, "OEF-Philippines: Thinking COIN, Practicing FID," *Special Warfare Magazine*, 23, no. 01 (January-February 2010), 11.

U.S. intervention in the Philippines dates back to 1898 and the Spanish–American War, when the U.S. fought Spain over Cuban independence and secured the Philippine Islands after defeating the Spanish Navy in the Pacific.<sup>111</sup> The United States has maintained a generally cooperative relationship with the Philippines, ranging from actual governance of the nation to close partnership that includes American military basing for better access to the Pacific.<sup>112</sup> In 2001, the United States received a request from the Philippine government for help in training their national counterterrorist force.<sup>113</sup> The mission began without fanfare, and was conducted with relatively few soldiers. USSF from 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) were deployed and became the primary effort in the country.<sup>114</sup> The USSF mission took an indirect approach that focused on FID in support of Philippine military COIN operations.<sup>115</sup> According to LTC Brian Petit,

The heart of the strategy is based on building relationships, reinforcing legitimate institutions, building security-force capabilities, sharing intelligence and information, developing focused civil-military programs, and aggressively promoting local acts of good governance.<sup>116</sup>

Petit affirms that the core strategy in the Philippines was indirect from the beginning and much different from the methodologies used in Iraq and Afghanistan. The mission in the Philippines was well tailored and viewed as a success by the Philippine government.

## **1. Conflict Interaction**

The conflict in the Philippines has been indirect largely due to the indirect paradigm being the only option due to restrictions imposed by the Philippine government

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<sup>111</sup> Cherilyn A. Walley, “A Century of Turmoil: America’s Relationship with the Philippines,” *Special Warfare Magazine* 17, no. 01 (September 2004), 4.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> C.H. Briscoe, “Why the Philippines?: ARSOF’s Expanded Mission in the War On Terror,” *Special Warfare Magazine* 17, no. 1 (September 2004): 2.

<sup>114</sup> Petit, *Special Warfare Magazine*, 11.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.



and accepted by the U.S. government. While the U.S. government was invited to help the Philippine government, the U.S. was to serve in an advisory and support capacity.

The Al Qaeda affiliates in the country, most prominently Abu Sayaaf and Jemaah Islamiyah, typically hid within the civilian populations of the southern Philippines to conduct terrorist activities against the government. The U.S. focus in this conflict was to train the Philippine military in COIN operations. Thus, the overall conflict strategic interaction was indirect versus indirect, between a strong actor (the U.S.-backed government) and weaker actors (Al Qaeda affiliates).

## **2. Freedom of Maneuver**

The United States had limited maneuver space in the Philippines from the outset, both from a political and physical standpoint. Having involved itself in a large-scale conflict in Afghanistan and contemplating opening another front in Iraq, the National Command Authorities (NCA) found opening a third theater of large-scale operations unpalatable. In addition, the Government of the Philippines restricted political space for military operations. The Philippines' formal request for aid came with stipulations that prevented direct-combat operations, thus circumscribing the U.S. role and ability to participate in the conflict.<sup>117</sup> These restrictions created an environment where American freedom of maneuver, from a physical and political standpoint, was limited.

## **3. Resource Allocation**

As with the freedom to maneuver, the resources available and U.S. willingness to expend them remained constrained in the Philippines. Afghanistan and Iraq consumed massive military resources. The United States had few remaining tangible assets to dedicate and was furthermore unwilling to spend resources in an obscure campaign while problems in Afghanistan and Iraq grew intractably complex. As a result, the conflict in

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<sup>117</sup> Petit, *Special Warfare Magazine*, 11.

the Philippines is distinguished by the small element of SOF assigned to the mission, the indirect nature of operations, and limited freedom of maneuver.<sup>118</sup>

#### **4. The Importance of the Objective**

The U.S. became involved in the Philippines by request. The goals and objectives of a longtime ally aligned with urgent U.S. interests, in that insurgent groups in the Philippines were affiliated with Al Qaeda and therefore tied to the GWOT. Insurgents in the Philippines never posed an existential threat to the United States, nor was there a critical requirement to respond to a major terrorist attack on the American homeland that originated from the Philippines. Therefore, the importance of the objective in the Philippines began low and remained low throughout the campaign.

#### **5. Analysis**

The Philippine conflict exhibits similarities with the other cases studied. All three involved the U.S. in counterinsurgency operations against an enemy employing indirect means; all three conflicts involved weaker opponents; and all three conflicts focused on attacking Al Qaeda and its affiliates. However, that is where the comparisons end. The conflict in the Philippines began as an insurgency and remained so for the duration of the conflict, whereas the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan both evolved in conflict type during their course.

Andre Beaufre's metrics (freedom of maneuver, available resources, and importance of the objective) began and remained limited during the conflict. Due to U.S. constraints imposed by the Government of the Philippines and priority commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, freedom of maneuver, politically and physically, was limited. Restrictions on combat operations forced the United States to assume an indirect strategy, and involvement in two highly visible wars both limited the American presence and necessitated an indirect approach.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 11.

Because the objectives in the Philippines were limited, the military response was modest and indirect. A small group of special-operations personnel, spearheaded by a USSF group, was authorized to use indirect methods and did so successfully and without fanfare.

## **6. Conclusion**

This chapter discussed types of interaction and Beaufre's metrics for three conflicts in the global war on terrorism. In Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. freedom of maneuver became severely constrained, the importance of the overall objective dwindled and the allocation of resources and willingness to expend resources plummeted. In the Philippines, the U.S. began the conflict with limited freedom of maneuver, limited resources, and an objective with limited importance, none of which changed during the course of conflict.

In Afghanistan, the U.S. strategy changed frequently. The conflict began with few constraints, using a hybrid methodology of direct-conflict interaction executed by USSF and their partners against an enemy using a direct-conflict methodology. Nevertheless, it quickly evolved to where conventional forces were employed directly against an insurgency operating indirectly. As a result of this strategic interaction, the U.S. was unable to achieve its goals in Afghanistan and has steadily withdrawn troops, hoping to end its involvement as soon as politically possible.

In Iraq as well, changes were required in military strategy for conflict resolution. As in Afghanistan, the U.S. initially enjoyed unlimited freedom of maneuver, near limitless resources, and an important objective. A very conventional and deliberate direct vs. direct conflict was fought against the Iraqi army, which the United States soundly won, quickly achieving the objective of toppling Saddam Hussein. As the conflict mutated into an insurgency and civil war, U.S. freedom of maneuver, importance of the objective and willingness to expend resources was reduced. However, the United States continued to use conventional forces, supported by USSF, in what had become direct vs. indirect interaction. Ultimately, time ran out. The U.S. downsized its presence in Iraq under presidential order without having achieved its desired end states.

Alternatively, in the Philippines, the U.S. experienced a successful campaign, in which the Beaufre metrics supported an indirect approach. Both the U.S. and the enemy employed indirect strategies and, over time, the U.S. achieved success as the conflict had gone unnoticed by the American public and international community. In the Philippines, the U.S. was able to employ USSF indirectly in a small footprint where it could operate almost indefinitely and achieve success avoiding any domestic political pressure.

These cases validate Ivan Arreguín-Toft's central thesis that if a strong actor encounters a weaker actor and uses the same strategic approach, the advantage lies with the stronger actor. Using an indirect approach against an adversary using an indirect approach increases the likelihood of achieving strategic effects and greatly expands the time available for the strong actor to achieve these effects. Additionally, the application of Beaufre's metrics suggests that where freedom of maneuver is limited, willingness to expend resources is low, and the importance of the objective is low, employing a large force that requires national support only serves to reduce the amount of time an actor has to achieve success in a conflict. As a result, that actor's overall likelihood for of victory against an opponent using an indirect strategy is reduced. The next chapter, and conclusion to this thesis, will more precisely identify when Special Forces offer an option for conflict resolution and when the U.S. government should consider using USSF in a supported role as an instrument of national power.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This thesis examines whether Special Forces offer the NCA a superior alternative to conventional military forces in prosecuting indirect conflicts under certain conditions. For purposes of analysis, it is assumed that USSF may offer strategic advantages when other potential responses are limited. To test this hypothesis and identify relevant conditions that may indicate indirect action as the preferred approach, “indirect conflict” is defined and its use by a host of actors in the last hundred years is discussed. Also examined are the organization and capabilities of USSF, how Special Forces may be best deployed, and whether indirect strategies have yielded significant advantage. Three case studies are used to compare results and suggest optimal practices for achieving policy goals.

### **A. RESEARCH QUESTION**

The question considered is whether Special Forces offer policymakers an effective and efficient alternative to general-purpose forces in certain contexts and, if so, under what conditions do these advantages emerge?

This research provisionally accepts Beaufre’s conditional metrics as a point of departure. Beaufre’s research predicts that USSF can be more successful than general forces in achieving policy goals under the following environmental conditions:

1. Freedom of maneuver is restricted.
2. Resources are constrained due to physical, fiscal, and or political limitations.
3. The objective is less than vital to the national interest or national survival.

To test this hypothesis, the evolution of indirect strategy is analyzed and recent case studies involving the United States, between 2001 and 2013, are provided. The organizational design of USSF, its two core missions, and their application in an indirect context are also examined.

## **1. Case Studies**

The cases reviewed represent situations in which the U.S. faced an adversary that was significantly weaker by conventional standards. These cases were analyzed according to type and evolution of conflict interaction. Beaufre's conflict metrics were applied and the force structure used by the U.S. to prosecute the conflict was examined.

## **2. Summary and Determinations**

Indirect conflict is becoming the strategy of choice for weak actors. Alarming, strong actors are also losing to weak actors more frequently.<sup>119</sup> That a strong actor such as the U.S. be capable of choosing and implementing an indirect strategy is shown as critical in dynamic security environments. Few adversaries possess the means or will to engage in full-scale conventional confrontation with a strong actor, and the U.S. absolute power advantage makes a direct strategy untenable for weak challengers. Thus, indirect strategies are the preferred, and often the only, tool for weak actors. Alarming, strong actors such as the U.S. find it increasingly challenging to defeat weak enemies. Ivan Arreguín-Toft's research indicates that in conflicts where a strong actor applies a direct approach against a weak actor's indirect approach, the strong actor will lose 63 percent of the time.<sup>120</sup> This statistic should serve as a wakeup call for all strong actors. Considering the historical scorecard, strong actors should also be aware that in small wars, an absolute power advantage might be a hindrance as much as a benefit. Given the increasing losses of strong actors, Arreguín-Toft identifies a need for the strong to wield two forces: one with which to counter conventional threats, wage traditional interstate warfare, and deter other strong actors; and one that is insidious—which does not seek to destroy the enemy outright, but rather attacks those elements that encourage the enemy's will to fight.<sup>121</sup> Arreguín-Toft recommends that the latter force be capable of implementing indirect strategies against weak actors employing indirect approaches.<sup>122</sup> He asserts that the

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<sup>119</sup> Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 5.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

strong force must be able to recognize when an indirect strategy is appropriate and employ its indirect force within that context.

In the United States DOD, the USSF already exists mostly as an indirect force. Unfortunately, in Afghanistan and Iraq, policy and USSF decision makers strongly preferred using this indirect force in a direct manner, producing sub-optimal results. The odds of defeating a weak adversary can be improved<sup>123</sup> if glamorous direct approaches are resisted and tedious, but effective, indirect approaches are allowed to work. The temptation to use Special Forces in a direct manner first may be overcome by identifying this phenomenon and discouraging<sup>124</sup> reflexive deployments by educating decision and policymakers about USSF capabilities and strategy options. It is important to note that the U.S. used USSF in an indirect approach in the Philippines. The U.S. was compelled to adopt this approach due to constraints placed on the U.S. by the Philippine Government. The U.S. was invited to provide training and assistance to Philippine security forces addressing terror related challenges in that country. The Philippine Government limited the United States' freedom of maneuver and compelled the U.S. to use the correct strategic approach, which was ultimately successful.

Confronted with an indirect threat and a choice between direct and indirect strategies, this thesis recommends that the U.S. follow a decision process that first considers the domestic and international political climates. If the use of conventional forces would escalate the conflict to undesirable levels or disrupt world politics such that sanctions and restrictions are subsequently placed on the U.S., an indirect strategy should be preferred. Similarly, if the U.S. is short of resources (or willingness to use its resources), whether because of economic constraints, limited political support, or the need for a low visibility option, an indirect strategy should be strongly considered.

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<sup>123</sup> Kiras highlights a key assumption that is a valid assumption for this thesis. The capability of USSF cannot be relied upon if the broader strategy and application are inappropriately chosen and employed. For this thesis, USSF must be applied within the context of an indirect approach to be successful in achieving U.S. policy goals. Only then do their capabilities lend to the successful application in a conflict that is bound by Beaufre's metrics.

<sup>124</sup> James Kiras, *Special Operations and the Nature of Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism*, Vol. 17 (New York: Routledge, 2006), 80.

Finally, if the objective is not of great importance and the survival of the U.S. or allies are not at stake, an indirect strategy may be expected to best attain policy goals.

Although this research finds freedom of maneuver the most critical variable in Beaufre's model, all three variables must be in play for in the strong actor's decision to take an indirect approach. Beaufre's variables are found in the three cases analyzed using Arreguín-Toft's model. In nearly all cases involving strong and weak actors, the strong encountered a reduction in freedom of maneuver, displayed reluctance to begin or continue spending resources, and had judged that national survival was not in jeopardy. An example from Arreguín-Toft is Russia's involvement in the Murid War in the Caucasus from 1830–1859. Russia's interest lay in its desire to protect the region that now is the nation of Georgia.<sup>125</sup> In the course of the conflict, Russia reduced its operational space by pursuing barbaric practices (total war including punitive retaliatory attacks) against the Murids. Thus, despite military superiority, the Russians experienced diminished effectiveness and strengthened support for Murid leadership through inappropriate direct strategies.<sup>126</sup> The case studies in this thesis support the lessons derived from this anecdote concerning the vital importance of the type of strategic interaction chosen.

## **B. EXISTING CAPABILITIES**

Arreguín-Toft's conclusions promoting a U.S. military force dedicated to indirect warfare are supported by this research. Such a force, however, already exists within the Department of Defense in the form of USSF, and that American Special Forces have proven themselves capable of implementing successful indirect strategies. The nature, organizational design, and primary functions of USSF represent a viable alternative when the NCA requires economy of force and reduced risk in meeting policy goals. While this research does not suggest that conventional forces cannot implement or succeed using an indirect strategy, this thesis asserts that the intensive training and selection of USSF

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<sup>125</sup> Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 69.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



personnel uniquely prepare them for indirect action with minimal political and military risk, within a defined context.<sup>127</sup> The core mission of USSF—unconventional warfare—is squarely within the domain of indirect conflict. These missions offer the NCA a vehicle towards success in conflicts and align with Beaufre’s criteria.

The small numbers of USSF and their ability to remain largely unseen reduce the risk of conflict escalation to levels that require conventional interaction. USSF relies largely on surrogate forces in the form of specially trained military elements from the host nation, thus ensuring that the majority of tactical participants are familiar and acceptable. This low signature reduces the chance of the U.S. being pulled into a broader conflict. Likewise, USSF’s low visibility approach to achieving results allows the U.S. to maximize political maneuver space and minimize cost. This buys time, as minimized spending is less likely to excite political opposition (as conventional forces expenditures typically do), thereby extending the time available to achieve goals.

While the capabilities of the USSF are clear, decision makers must resist the common temptation to use a direct approach to resolve all types of conflict, including those against a weaker actor. The free-lunch effect, whereby the reliable USSF is seen as a quick and easy direct tool, must be strongly rejected.<sup>128</sup> While USSF have unique capabilities, they also have significant limitations when improperly employed.

### **C. CASE-STUDY SUMMARY**

This thesis has looked at three recent cases to assess USSF advantages: the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq, and the conflict in the Philippines.

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<sup>127</sup> This statement assumes that USSF will be used within an appropriate mission set and focused toward an indirect strategy. There has been a tendency in recent conflicts to use USSF in direct conflict. USSF demonstrates an increased willingness to operate in this manner as well. However, for USSF to exploit its comparative advantages, the U.S. must adhere to an indirect strategic approach.

<sup>128</sup> Kiras, *Special Operations and the Nature of Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism*, 80.

## **1. The War in Afghanistan**

The conflict in Afghanistan began with direct conflict on both sides. Although the preponderance of U.S. forces in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2002 were members of Special Operations, the strategy pursued by the U.S. was direct. USSF paired with members of the Northern Alliance and conducted conventional and effective direct action attacks against a weaker state actor also employing a direct strategy. In December 2001, the Taliban switched to an indirect strategy after a series of defeats. The U.S. continued direct engagement, using conventional forces to attack Taliban strongholds and using USSF with their Afghan counterparts to do the same. The U.S. pursued a direct-versus-indirect strategy with large conventional forces violating Beaufre's strategy model. The U.S. experienced reduced freedom of maneuver, a significant decrease in resources available (resulting from the 2003 Iraq invasion) and a decline in the importance of conflict after Osama bin Laden escaped into Pakistan. The resulting strategic setting for the U.S. had changed. In 2009, the U.S. conducted a surge and placed a timeline for withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>129</sup> The surge did little to increase political will in the U.S. and ultimately force levels dwindled. Now, the Taliban is returning in strength.

## **2. The War in Iraq**

As in Afghanistan, the U.S. demonstrated limited ability to adjust its mode of strategic interaction to the adversary's strategic evolution. While at the outset, the U.S. enjoyed near-limitless freedom of maneuver, as the conflict evolved from conventional to insurgent to civil war, the U.S. failed to modify its strategic interaction.

The U.S. initially achieved overwhelming victory against the Iraqi army in a direct conventional fight. However, the conflict interaction changed and the U.S. found itself embroiled in an insurgency for which the U.S. was not prepared. As the conflict continued well past initial expectations, freedom of maneuver was reduced for the United States and a resulting waning willingness to pour resources into Iraq. As a result, the U.S. fell short of its desired policy goals. The expected absolute power advantage of the U.S.

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<sup>129</sup> Collins, *Small Wars Journal*, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/25/the-afghan-surge-is-over>.

did not lead to the immediate expected victory. As a result, the U.S. withdrew from Iraq without achieving its goals.

### **3. The War in the Philippines**

The Philippine government invited the U.S. in to provide advisory assistance to its military as it conducted a counterinsurgency campaign. The Philippine government limited U.S. freedom of maneuver. Additionally, U.S. resources were limited due to competing priorities and the Philippine turmoil was not an existential threat. Accordingly, this case was ideal for USSF using an indirect approach supporting Beaufre's strategic model. Consistent with the hypothesis of this research, the U.S. and USSF enjoyed excellent success in achieving policy goals in the Philippines.

## **D. INSIGHTS**

These cases suggest an inverse relationship between time and footprint: if a strong actor's force is large, the expectations raised by its absolute power advantage significantly reduce the timeframe for achieving success. If the footprint is small, expectations are limited and the actor can execute a protracted campaign. This point is critical, as the average duration of an insurgency is 118 months.<sup>130</sup>

This thesis urges that the deployment of USSF, using indirect strategies, be strongly considered in appropriate circumstances. It is the opinion of the author that the United States would likely have achieved greater success in Afghanistan and Iraq through indirect strategies carried out by USSF. The research finds that USSF is more likely to achieve superior results if employed to best advantage—as an agile force able to adapt to enemy changes—using an indirect approach. Furthermore, Beaufre's strategic model is compelling for determining when indirect approaches offer the best policy option.

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<sup>130</sup> Paul, Clarke, Grill, and Dunigan, *Paths to Victory*, 330.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

Historical trends highlight an increased need to consider indirect strategies to counter indirect threats.<sup>131</sup> This thesis finds that USSF as presently structured are ideally optimized for indirect strategic action, with advantages over conventional forces, where freedom of maneuver is limited, the will to devote resources is limited, and national survival is not at stake. This thesis recommends that USSF be employed judiciously in indirect strategies in support of U.S. policy objectives.

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<sup>131</sup> Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 45.

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